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'Own your narrative': teenagers as producers and consumers of porn in Netflix's *Sex Education*

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ABSTRACT
Netflix's *Sex Education* both represents sex education and educates viewers about sex. From the opening scene of the first episode, viewers are positioned to see this series as one that is not afraid to represent explicitly the details of a range of sexual experiences. The series' frank depiction of sexual relationships between characters, and its exploration of characters' hopes, fears, and choices regarding ways to express their sexual desire is, arguably, ground-breaking. This paper focuses upon the ways in which the series represents young people as producers and consumers of pornographic/erotic narratives, harnessing the communication options within their social settings to develop understandings of, and share, information that is often structured as 'inappropriate' for under-18 year-olds. *Sex Education* sits at the intersection of information (seeking), communication, and society, as young people explore issues of crucial interest and importance to them, which have been all but ignored in most of their school curriculum offerings. Challenging a dominant social perception of sexually-explicit materials as harmful to young people, and suggesting instead that such materials may be beneficial, the series demonstrates how young people may come together to learn about themselves and each other, even as they confront the double standards of a hypersexualised society that offers no legitimate speaking position to under-18s. In this environment, with adults absent from authentic discussion, young people co-construct their future adult selves through producing, consuming, and discussing sexual content (and activities) in conversation with other young people.

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Netflix's *Sex Education* both represents sex education and educates viewers about sex. From the opening scene of the first episode, which begins with Aimee and Adam having sex with Aimee on top, and then Adam from behind, and ends with Adam removing his condom and showing Aimee its empty contents, viewers are positioned to see this series as one that is not afraid to represent explicitly the details of a range of sexual experiences. The series' frank depiction of sexual relationships between characters, and its exploration of characters' hopes, fears, and choices regarding ways to express their sexual desire is,

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arguably, ground-breaking. The focus of this paper, however, is the way in which the series represents young people as producers and consumers of pornographic/erotic narratives. *Sex Education* is constructed as challenging a dominant social perception of sexually-explicit materials as harmful to young people, suggesting instead that such materials may be beneficial, especially when consumed and discussed in conversation with other young people.

An opening premise of *Sex Education* is that school-based sexual education programmes fail to achieve their goal of communicating relevant information to curious teenagers, redisposing high school students to seek information from other sources. This dynamic is narrativised in the plot device of two high school students – Otis and Maeve – addressing the information gap by offering a sex-therapy service to their high school peers. Otis's advice to and engagement with other students at Moordale Secondary School around sexual knowledge highlights the challenges posed by misinformation, misunderstanding, and misconstruction of conventional sex education curriculum. Otis's and Maeve's attempts to address the lack of fit-for-purpose school-delivered information constitutes a cogent argument for comprehensive Relationships and Sexual Education (RSE) in schools. For instance, the first episode of Season Two features students wearing masks to prevent transmission of chlamydia, clearly showcasing an extreme form of misinformation, or misinterpretation, regarding a common Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD).

Contextualising *Sex Education*

There is more at stake in discussions about sex education than the old Charlie Chaplin adage that 'Life is a tragedy when seen in closeup, but a comedy in long-shot' (attributed: Kramer, 1972). Confusion around sexual education, and consternation around teenagers' access to sexual content online, can be a source of concern and distress to young people, their families and other caregivers, educators, and policy makers. In Australia, for example, a Senate Environment and References Committee report was established to investigate and report back on the *Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet* (Senate Report, 2016). They discovered that there were very few accounts from teenagers about their own experiences of accessing adult content online. Instead, almost all available research which meets an appropriate confidence threshold (e.g., Quadara et al., 2017) has been done with professionals in fields that support teenagers who have experienced harm and/or distress (doctors, psychologists, etc.) or with people over 18 who are asked to recall their experiences of accessing adult content online.

The absence of young people's voices from this debate highlights the challenging Catch-22 that presents itself whenever the issues of young people's access to adult content is raised: how young people can have a speaking position on these matters when the regulatory environment dictates that they should not have encountered them. Given that young people do encounter these materials, how can an inclusive debate arise that takes seriously the perspectives of young people and accords them value in relation to more socially-powerful adult 'others', such as parents, relevant professionals, policymakers and regulators? Raising these issues in fictional representations is one such path – and that is, arguably, the path adopted by *Sex Education* – and inclusive, teen-

friendly research with rigorous ethical clearance and appropriate consents from teenagers and their parents is a further possible path.

This paper addresses the kinds of contribution that can be made by raising these important matters in dramatised and fictional contexts, but the paper is produced as one outcome of a grant funded by the Australian Research Council (DP190102435) entitled *Adolescents' perceptions of harm from accessing online sexual content*, on which the authors are co-researchers (See also Green et al., 2020 for a background discussion of how the grant links through to the Senate Committee, and its comparison of Australian data with data from Greece, Ireland, and Norway.). One area of concern to which the grant responds is the possibility that moral panics (Cohen, 2002) around teenagers' access to adult content online can obfuscate other matters which may be of equal or greater impact in teens' lives but which receive far less regulatory attention, such as cyberbullying and challenging user-generated content, such as 'thinspiration' (anorexia-supporting) sites and pro-suicide ideation.

Another concern is that teens who might wish to turn to adults to help them discuss and process content they may have encountered that might trouble or confront them may lack the language and the opportunity to address those issues in appropriate, supportive contexts. Indeed, teens may fear censure and punishment for putting themselves in 'harm's way' by accessing such materials or participating in activities when peers might have done so. Prohibitions such as that which operate around teens' engagement with adult content prevent the occurrence of 'a grown up conversation around children and porn online' (Nash et al., 2016), and may impede the development of resilience (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012) while also constructing teens' sexual feelings and activities as taboo.

Contextualising 'Sex Education'

Further complicating these dynamics is that the work that has been done with young people around their responses to the 'approved' information about sex and sexuality – the materials provided in sexual education classes – indicates that these classes are of little practical help in negotiating these challenging terrains. Adolescents currently perceive contemporary sexual education programmes to be bland and unfit for their needs (Bauer et al., 2020; Burns et al., 2019). Young people express a wish to discuss the qualitative elements of sexual activity and education, including pleasure and desire, given they are curious about relationships and sexuality, pornography use, and managing relationships (Bauer et al., 2020). Sex is often referred to only within the context of reproduction rather than highlighting its positive, pleasurable, and recreational aspects. Sex and sexuality that is predominantly discussed from a fear-based sex-negative viewpoint can have a detrimental effect and does not offer an accurate or balanced representation. As portrayed in *Sex Education,* young people in the throes of puberty are sexual beings and wish to express their sexuality in diverse ways. Ideally, education and sexual information should be imparted to support this process in an aware and open manner.

Children and young people of today born in the western world encounter a surrounding culture in which hypersexualised and sexual content is easily accessible. Despite this access, discussion of and education concerning sexuality remains essentially stunted and stigmatised. The resulting clash of conflicting attitudes, values, and behaviours is difficult

for any individual to navigate alone, yet young people generally receive insufficient education to mitigate the collision of values to which they are subjected by the adults in their lives (many of whom may happily consume adult content online, and most of whom, it is hoped, experience sexual activity as pleasurable and important). A more comprehensive, inclusive, adolescent-friendly Relationships and Sexual Education (RSE) curriculum, otherwise known as Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE), aims to provide the knowledge required to navigate these conversations and offer relevant and correct information to young people.

Sexual education that does not solely focus on education around Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and reducing pregnancies is usually far more effective (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021) in communicating views that balance the positive and negative teaching points around sex and sexuality. Comprehensive sexual education should include content such as pornography literacy, healthy relationships, communication skills, child sex abuse prevention, breaking gender stereotypes, and socio-emotional learning such as managing feelings, positive self- image, empathy, and respect for others, maintaining boundaries, and other models that support sexual violence prevention (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2021).

When offered proficiently, CSE is argued to be one of the most potent preventative measures in terms of reducing sexual violence. It is also cited as an effective strategy for combatting the negative effects of rising rates of pornography use by young people (Banyard et al., 2010; Holtzman & Menning, 2019). Substantial research illustrates the effectiveness of CSE in terms of increasing teenager wellbeing, supporting a healthy adulthood, and reducing widespread sexual violence (Banyard et al., 2010; Flood, 2016). Despite this research, CSE remains unmandated and inconsistent across both public and private schools in Australia and the US (Banyard et al., 2010; Holtzman & Menning, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2021).

Facilitated Relationships and Sexual Education in schools varies from school-to-school. There is no mandating of what is taught, no consistency between schools, and no auditing process (Burns et al., 2019). There is much room for improvement in terms of what is taught, in addition to the training provided to those who find themselves teaching CSE (or, often, the lack of such training). While progress is slowly being made, in response to worldwide outrage around #metoo, and acknowledgement of the widespread nature of sexual assault and lack of consent in schools, there is still much to be done. Despite reinvigorated understandings of 'consent' in adult conversations, various challenges and obstacles continue to inhibit progression in appropriate education for teens. Implementation of CSE involves and reflects the complex moral and ethical challenges posed in this area, and these issues are further complicated by resistance from parents and communities (Burns et al., 2019).

Additional obstacles include competing with an already overcrowded curriculum, lack of school support, and a general apprehension around delivery of CSE by teachers due to an absence of effective professional development in this area (Burns et al., 2019). Such obstacles reflect the fact that education is a sociocultural construct, subject to change, and has contested definitions of what it means to be educated (Sefton-Green & Erstad, 2017). In *Sex Education*, Otis and his friends illustrate that the current sexual education curriculum offered in schools leaves much to be desired and is in urgent need of updating. Otis and Maeve are positioned as having the confidence, knowledge, and vision to fill

the deficit left by the education system as it operates at Moordale High School, providing appropriate, teen-focused, sexual information. Most other schools are not so lucky.

Pornography as sex self- (couple-, group-) education

Many young people may use pornography as a form of sexual education due to the lack of comprehensive sexual education offered in schools (Albury, 2014; Wright, 2018). In *Sex Education*, Eric watches gay porn and Lily writes and illustrates a sexually explicit graphic novel to express an aspect of her desire. For sexually diverse and queer young people, pornography offers a source of information and support (Albury, 2014). Young people's consumption of pornography can present and reflect differing, and changing, sexual ideals that deviate from conservative, monogamous, heterosexual norms (Green, 2020; McKee et al., 2015). Evident throughout *Sex Education*, Otis and his teenage friends display an array of sexually diverse subjectivities (including pansexual, bi-sexual, asexual, and non-binary), representing an inclusive embrace of sexualities and an acceptance of diversity which is rarely encapsulated within the education system or in information about gendered identities.

With the rise of pornography use by young people on digital devices, there is speculation that content designed for adult entertainment, often positioned to fuel consumer fantasies, may lead to detrimental perceptions of sex and sexuality, serving as a form of sexual 'knowledge' in the absence of appropriate formal education. For young girls, the continual exposure to hypersexualised imagery may create an expectation that they should conform to a certain body-type, possibly triggering or exacerbating low self-esteem (Griffiths et al., 2018). Some images and videos may encourage young people to engage in certain sexual acts before they feel ready, and without personal desire other than a wish to please. There is a lack of appreciation that much commercial pornography foregrounds minority sexual activities, reflecting fantasy drivers that may reflect the fact that adult women choose not to participate in such activities. An uncritical reading of such visual texts may contribute to misunderstandings around the pleasure of sexual activities and inhibit understandings that what is pleasurable for one individual, or one couple (or group), may be anathema for others.

Pornographic material's concentration upon male-centred pleasure, and the increased pressure for sexual agents to embody a certain physique, drives many misplaced conceptions around engagement in everyday sexual activities. For young boys, prolonged exposure to pornography may introduce pressure to develop and maintain a certain body shape, while complicating acceptance of pre-adolescent and maturing physiques. Continued viewing of pornographic materials may create unhealthy perceptions of sexual activities, may focus too centrally on the male orgasm, and may contribute towards insecurities and obsessions around possessing a sufficiently large penis size (Griffiths et al., 2018).

Pornography may also play a major role in the casualisation and trivialisation of sex. While it may not be solely responsible for distorted cultural messages in this area, its influence is explained by research suggesting that visual forms of media are more powerful than verbal or textual content in their influence upon public attitudes, and young people's development of a sense of a sexual self (Pearl et al., 2015). Given the widespread availability of pornography, coupled with the lack of conversation between adults and young people about these topics, misperceptions and misunderstandings abound.

While these misunderstandings could be mitigated by information about, and relevant honest and open-minded education concerning, sexuality, such comprehensive CSE is lacking. Reflecting these absences, pornography may have deeply concerning implications for both individual teenagers and for their age cohort. The consumption of pornography may direct an assumed sexual script that implicates social learning dynamics (Bandura & Walters, 1977), impacting intimate relationships and sexual expectations by encouraging the mimicking and incorporating of acts witnessed in pornographic texts into teens' sexual repertoires (McCormack & Wignall, 2017; Wright et al., 2016). Despite extensive research indicating the value of discussion around these issues, young people are too frequently excluded from conversations regarding their own well-being and education (Baker, 2015), an oversight that the Australian Research Council research previously mentioned seeks to address.

There may also be added benefits to pornography, which reflects the intersection where Netflix's *Sex Education* and the lack of sexual education worldwide meet, particularly in terms of pleasure. For sexually diverse and queer young people, pornography can offer a source of information and support that is often not available in homes or schools (Albury, 2014). Young people's consumption of pornography can also present and reflect differing, and changing, sexual ideals that deviate from conservative, monogamous, heterosexual norms, offering an array of sexual diversities and possibilities (Green, 2020; McKee et al., 2015). Ultimately, despite community fears regarding sexualisation of teenagers at too tender and young an age, young people are sexual beings who wish to express themselves sexually and desire knowledge around how to have sex. Pornography provides both awareness and acceptance surrounding the notion that sex can in fact be pleasurable, a notion that is often removed completely from both schooling and homes (McKee et al., 2021).

Although deeply imbricated within western culture across age-groups, sexualities, and socio-economic class, pornography remains a mostly under-investigated phenomenon in relation to its impact on young people. Young people who access adult sexual content accidentally or without prior warning may be more affected than their consenting counterparts who actively seek it out (McCormack & Wignall, 2017), but the risks may be overstated (McCormack & Wignall, 2017) and may reflect adults' fears and professionals' experiences of minority responses. There is a compelling case for researchers to investigate the broader impact of pornography use by adolescents (Quadara et al., 2017), gathering the perspectives of the young people themselves. In the absence of appropriate data, the proliferation of pornography and its use by young people remains an area of growing concern, particularly since the evidence indicates that teenagers in Western countries (for example, Australia and the US) are increasingly using pornography (Flood, 2016). In Australia, just under half (44%) of youth aged 9–16 have encountered sexual imagery online (Quadara et al., 2017). Regardless of whether pornography is accessed intentionally or unintentionally, it may impact upon adolescents' future relationships and sexual development (Baker, 2015). There is no consensus as to what pornography is teaching youth, or its impact.

Teenage sexuality

Teenagers' sexuality is a universal cause of social anxiety, but especially when children are below the 'age of consent'. This age is a mutable marker, as Matthew Waites (2005) makes

clear, variable across cultures and changing over the centuries, but generally policed by anxious parents and various forms of social censure. To the gatekeepers of children's sexuality and sexual self-expression, the anxiety that accompanies these concerns serves to elide fantasy with reality. Children's fantasies are likewise policed and controlled, censored, and censured, as with their sexual behaviour itself. In most contemporary western societies, the fantasies of under-aged protosexual children are fuelled and shared via the internet and popular culture. While *Sex Education* skirts this issue by representing young people who are 16 years old when the series begins, the age of viewers is not confined to the age of the characters. As *Sex Education* creator, Laurie Nunn, states in relation to the Season Two cliffhanger, '"I've been getting a lot of angry Instagram messages from 14-year-olds," Nunn says with a laugh, then quickly catches herself. "Who probably shouldn't be watching the show"' (Nicholson, 2020). In this 'catch', both Nicholson writing the article and Nunn creating the series show the reach of social censure.

The sharing of sexual fantasies between the generations is generally constructed as a taboo. Although *Sex Education* does not represent this dynamic, one of the causes of Otis's embarrassment is his mother's openness about sex, both in their home, but also publicly. In Episode 1 of Season One, for instance, Otis is embarrassed when Adam shares a video with the whole class of Otis's mother on tv demonstrating on an eggplant how to give a hand job. Parents telling their teenage children about their own sexual fantasies is as unthinkable as the reverse. Indeed, where such behaviour exists it tends to be part of an exploitative relationship with a mature adult's explicit verbalising of sexual content to a child identified as a characteristic of grooming behaviour (Craven et al., 2006). In such circumstances, the sharing of sexual fantasy between same-age young people is both a covert and subversive activity. It serves as a claim for agency and acknowledges that some areas of an individual's interior life are beyond the reach of the censor.

Although it is not only males that consume adult content online, and accepting the evidence that girls also access such pornography (Livingstone et al., 2011), girls are less likely than boys to watch sexual content and more likely than boys to say that they are bothered by such images. Consequently, video-based pornography is particularly associated with teenage boys, who are constructed as being more likely to access such material and less likely to find it disturbing. This dynamic has been highlighted by filmmaker Kidron (2013) who conducted an extended interview with two (male) friends talking about their consumption of online porn. What is generally less acknowledged, however, is that many young people can readily distinguish between the fantasy that is pornography and the reality which is the messy complexity of teenage romantic relationships. As one male teen noted, speaking to one of the authors, 'You don't drive a car like *Fast and Furious*, you don't run a relationship like a porn movie'. Ringrose and Renold (2012) suggest that 'fantasy might operate as a space of survivability, political subjectivity and resistance'. A teenager's playful exploration of sexual fantasy has no necessary link to sexual fact. One key problematic is that parents' and gatekeepers' capacity to distinguish between teens' fantasies and sexual fact is blurred as a result of sexual taboos and social anxieties.

Much of the mainstream media commentary concerning Netflix's *Sex Education* focuses upon the series' realistic portrayal of teen sex, effectively educating young people about sex in a way that the majority school-based Relationship and Sex Education

programmes do not (Gilbert, 2019; Sawa, 2019; Scott, 2020a; Smythe, 2020; Stuever, 2019; Thomas & Freedman, 2021). Creator Laurie Nunn, speaking about the writing process for the show, says that the seven people in the writers' room often come back to the question, '"What did I want to know when I was 16?"' (Royal Television Society, 2020). In an article in *The Guardian,* in which teens discuss the show, 16-year-old Pia says the show '"answered some of my weird questions about sex". She loves that they "discuss actual sex itself – something many worry about but are too embarrassed to ask about"' (Smythe, 2020). Even Asa Butterfield, the actor who plays Otis admits he wishes the show '"had been around when I was a teenager. People have told me how much it's helped them – whether it's coming out to their parents or boosting their confidence. It reassures people that they're not weird or alone"' (Hogan, 2021).

Building on this idea that people are not alone in their desires, their insecurities, and their hesitation in discussing these desires and insecurities, the show emphasises the importance of communication. As Nunn says, '"At the heart of the show, it's just very much about trying to be more open, to communicate more … "' (Royal Television Society, 2020). Even when the show represents what may be considered private proclivities, such as watching pornography or creating erotica, the consumption and creation process is often shared with another person inside the story world, even as the viewer shares the experience visually.

Verging on versions of desire

Sex Education revolves around a group of high school students exploring their sexuality. Otis lives with his mother, Jean, who works out of their home as a sex and relationship therapist. School tough girl and rebel Maeve convinces Otis to use his knowledge about sex to set up a sex therapy business, which Otis and Maeve run out of an abandoned toilet block on high school property. Maeve finds the clients and handles the money, and Otis delivers the advice. Other key characters are Otis's best friend, Eric; Maeve's friend Aimee, who hides her friendship with Maeve from the mean cool kids with whom she spends most of her time; Adam, a bully, Aimee's sort-of boyfriend, and son of the school headmaster; and Lily, creator of graphic novel erotica and a virgin who is desperate to have sex.

The title for this paper, 'own your narrative', comes from the first episode of Season One when Otis and Maeve discover Adam in the toilet block with a huge erection, whimpering in fear. Adam asks them not to leave him alone, and when Otis starts asking Adam questions about what happens, Maeve discovers Otis's penchant for helping by talking. Adam discloses that he took three pills of Viagra. When Otis asks why he took the pills, Adam admits that he wanted his penis to get hard and then elaborates by saying that there is too much pressure on him because he is the headmaster's son and because everyone knows he has a 'big massive elephant cock'. Adam concludes by saying he wishes he could be a normal kid with a normal dick and a normal dad. In response, Otis states, 'you need to own your narrative, not let it control you' (Nunn & Taylor, 2019). This advice to own one's narrative becomes a touchstone for the rest of the series as other characters seek to construct their personal sense of self, often in conversation with a peer.

Although it has touched upon a range of topics, the focus for this essay hones in upon the ways in which the consumption and production of pornography and erotica are

represented in *Sex Education* in order to challenge perceptions that porn and erotica are harmful. As part of that focus, the character Lily offers a specific articulation around these issues in her creation of erotica to express her personal desire. The first time the audience meets Lily is in Episode 3, Season 1, which begins with Lily seated at her desk drawing a graphic narrative. As Lily draws, a woman's voiceover croons,

> As she entered the interrogation chamber, Glenoxi felt her captor eyeing her. His long serpentine tongue oozed out of his wet-gash-like mouth. She eyed his pulsating purple penis, inching towards it. She felt her abdominal sex cavity quiver. She could almost taste one of his three mucal glands. As she pulled his glistening phallus inside her, she felt … She felt … What am I meant to be feeling here? This is your fantasy. What do we do next? (Nunn et al., 2019)

As the fantasy voiceover speaks, the camera moves from a mid-shot of Lily drawing and swaying in her seat, trying to find adequate words of expression, to close-ups of the illustrations. The final panel she draws represents the moment of penetration explicitly: Geloxi, naked, sits up with her legs spread, her hand on a tentacle phallus, which she pushes into her vagina. Lily's pencil rests on the page, just below Geloxi's buttocks like another phallus. Significantly, Lily acknowledges both the range and limits of her own fantasy, and by drawing a graphic narrative, she brings together visual and verbal fantasy. The scene ends with Lily whispering, 'I don't know,' an acknowledgement of the disconnect between her fantasy and her reality.

Later in the episode, Lily tries to bring more realism to her fantasy. In an homage to Alyson Hannigan's famous quote in *American Pie* that half of band camp is Sex Ed (Weitz, 1999), Lily offers to help Eric catch up on what he missed when he joins the school Swing Band. They agree to meet after school at Eric's house. Eric, seated on the edge of his bed with his back to Lily, turns around to find Lily with her top off, breasts bared:

> Lily: Would you like to have sex with me?
> Eric: What – What are you doing? Why are you naked?
> Lily: It's ok. I want to.
> Eric: Oh!
> Lily: I'd like to have sex. I think you're sexy, and I really want to have sex with someone.
> Eric: I'm gay!
> Lily: Fuck! Really?
> Eric: Yeah, properly!
> Lily: You could pretend I'm a boy … . We could wank each other off.
> Eric: No. No. No, thank you.

Although this scene unfolds humorously, Lily's naïve attempt to have sex with Eric is underpinned by her previously flagged desire to experience sex beyond the pages of her fiction. Tellingly, even after Eric tells her he is gay, she reverts to fantasy, suggesting that he pretend she is a boy. The scene ends with another form of fantasy when Lily sees the fabulously flamboyant clothes in Eric's closet and suggests they do a makeover.

When the scene continues later in the episode, Lily's fantasy life merges with Eric's as they watch gay porn together. The scene opens with Eric and Lily seated on the bed together, facing each other, Eric wearing a fuchsia-coloured boa, Lily in a slinky silver top and pants, Eric applying makeup to Lily's cheek:

Lily: It's very annoying that you don't want to have sex with me.
Eric: Sorry [chuckles].
Lily: I just wanna know how it feels.
Eric: Yeah.
Lily: Have you done it?
Eric: Not all the way, but I do watch quite a lot of porno.
Lily: Show me.
Eric: You don't wanna see gay porn.
Lily: I definitely do.

The scene then cuts to the screen of a laptop that shows one man on a bed on his hands and knees, his pants around his knees, while another man in briefs approaches him. Lily's face reflects in the screen of the laptop, her mouth positioned perfectly on one man's crotch. The camera then shifts, so viewers watch Eric and Lily watching porn rather than seeing what is on the screen. Eric explains that what they are watching is called rimming, and then they have a conversation where Eric expresses how nice it will be to have sex, especially with someone who really gets him. Lily responds by saying, 'I'm not sure. I just wanna feel a dick in my vagina'. In this exchange between Eric and Lily, porn becomes another form of sex education, at least for Lily. For Eric, it substitutes for sex (supplemented with wanking, as Eric says), until he finds a lover with whom he can share his pleasure. Eric's romanticisation of sex contrasts with Lily's pragmatism. For her, watching porn teaches her about rimming but leaves her unsatisfied. Her response signals that, although she fantasises, her fantasy does not denote a focus on *romantic* fantasy; instead, it is more a curiosity about the actual experience of sex.

This bonding moment is unfortunately interrupted when Eric's dad enters the bedroom. When he sees Eric and Lily in dramatic makeup and clothes and hears porn moaning in the background, he politely asks Lily to leave, a tray with a cup of tea in his hands. Lily leaves and then re-enters the room saying, 'It was me who asked to see the rimming. Sorry'. While it is unclear whether Eric's father is upset by the way his son looks, or the porn playing on the laptop, Eric defends their activities with a smile on his face: 'Dad, it wasn't … We were just havin' a bit of fun'. This explanation confronts the serious way that most parents are primed to respond to young people watching porn and, instead, places it in the category of 'having fun' rather than 'experiencing harm'. Even so, Eric's father responds by saying, 'It's time for you to grow up. Get a job. Take responsibility. See what the real world is all about'. By positioning Eric and Lily's actions as not in the real world, Eric's dad acknowledges a distinction between fantasy and reality, but also implies that fantasy is for children: it is a space that adults, and even young people on the verge of adulthood, should not occupy.

Sex Education appears to be raising important issues of relevance across western contexts. The first season of the show reached 40 million households after just one month on Netflix (Scott, 2020b). With Season Two completed, and Season Three released on 17 September 2021, an even larger audience might be tuning in to be educated about sex on television, rather than in the classroom. Arguably, the series highlights a crucial information gap and an extreme example of how conventional education systems may be failing to meet the socioemotional needs of teen high school students and their families.

Conclusion

This paper highlights an example of how popular culture is plugging a gap in formal educative frameworks which are designed to support teens' engagement with sexual information and knowledge. In addressing that absence, the series *Sex Education* also foregrounds the unmet needs of contemporary teenagers for fit-for-purpose, appropriate, life-relevant skills around their understandings of sexuality and sexual practice. The series positions teenagers as active seekers of information, ready and willing to find, adapt, create, and make use of relevant content in a quest for more authentic engagement with these issues than might be available in most 'sex education' classes.

The series, like teenagers' lives, confronts a range of double-binds and double standards in western societies that are deeply conflicted over, and in denial about, young people (under 18) and sex. Indeed, within Australia there are states (such as Victoria) where the act of consensual, age-appropriate (under-18) sexting is constructed as 'child exploitation material', simply because it involves other teens of the same age (Dobson, 2021). In these scenarios, and in fact, teens have been convicted for what might be termed the 'creation of child pornography' charges and placed for life on the Sex Offenders' Register. Although the situation is liberalising in some Australian jurisdictions (such as New South Wales), the inequity of criminalising an everyday activity that is entirely legal and permissible for over-18s, just because the participants are under 18, is a stark one.

Most people would consider that the teenage years are positioned at the fulcrum of the journey between child and adult, at a time when the construction of the future self is a young person's core business. In the empty wasteland that represents much of adults' offerings around sex to the younger generations in their care, *Sex Education* offers a foundation for a cross-generational discussion that can be constructive, respectful, and exploratory: just what most parents might wish for in a fit-for-purpose sexuality and relationships curriculum.

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